



The Holy See

ADDRESS OF POPE FRANCIS TO THE 66TH GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE ITALIAN EPISCOPAL CONFERENCE

*Synod Hall
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Video

I have always been struck by the way the conversation between Jesus and Peter ends: “Follow me!” (Jn 21:19). The final word. Peter had passed through so many states of mind at that moment: shame, because he remembered the three times he had denied Jesus, and then a little embarrassment, not knowing how to respond, and then peace, he was reassured, with that “Follow me!”. But then, the tempter came once more, the temptation to curiosity: “Tell me, Lord, what can you tell me about this man [the Apostle John]? What will happen to this man?”. “It is none of your concern. Follow me”. I would like to go on with this message, only ... I heard it as I was listening to this: “What concern is it of yours. Follow me”. The *following of Jesus* is what is important! It is more important for us. This has always, always struck me.... I thank you for this invitation, I thank the President for his words. I thank the members of the Presidency.... A newspaper reported regarding the members of the Presidency that “this is the Pope’s man, this isn’t the Pope’s man, this is the Pope’s man...”. But the five or six in the Presidency are all the Pope’s men!, to speak in “political” terms.... We need to use the language of communion. The press so often invents things, doesn’t it?

In preparing myself for this meeting of grace, I returned many times to the words of the Apostle, which express what I — *what we all* - have at heart: “For I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen you, that is, that we may be mutually encouraged by each other’s faith, both yours and mine” (Rom 1:11-12).

I have lived this year seeking to put myself in step with each of you: in personal encounters, at the

audiences, during visits to your regions, I listened to you recount your hopes, weariness and pastoral concerns; in sharing at the same table we were refreshed, finding in the bread that was broken the fragrance of encounter, the ultimate reason for our going out to the city of men with a joyous countenance and the readiness to be a presence and gospel of life.

At this time, together with my gratitude for your generous service, I would like to offer you several points of reflection with which to reexamine the ministry, in order to conform oneself ever more to the will of Him who has placed us at the head of his Church.

The faithful people look to us. The people are watching us! I remember a film: *The Children are Watching Us*, it was beautiful. The people look to us. They look to us to help them understand the uniqueness of their own daily lives in the context of God's providential plan. Ours is a demanding mission: it requires that we know the Lord to the point of abiding in Him; at the same time, it also requires that we take up our abode in the life of our particular Churches, to the point of knowing faces, needs and potentiality. If synthesizing this twofold demand is entrusted to the responsibility of each one, nevertheless it possesses several common features. Today I would like to indicate three of them, which contribute to outlining our profile as the Pastors of a Church, which is first and foremost the community of the Risen One, thus his body, and lastly, the anticipation and promise of the Kingdom.

In this way I also mean to encounter, at least indirectly, those who wonder what the Bishop of Rome's expectations are for the Italian Episcopate.

1. Pastors of a Church that is the community of the Risen One

Let us therefore ask ourselves: Who is Jesus Christ for me? How has he marked the truth of my personal history? What does my life say about Him?

Faith, brothers, is the living memory of an encounter, fed by the fire of the Word, which shapes ministry and anoints all our people; faith is a seal placed on the heart: without this safeguard, without assiduous prayer, the Pastor is exposed to the danger of being ashamed of the Gospel, of ultimately diluting the scandal of the Cross in worldly wisdom.

Temptations, which seek to obscure the primacy of God and of his Christ, are "legion" in the life of a Pastor: they range from apathy, which ends in mediocrity, to the search for a quiet life that avoids renunciation and sacrifice. A hurried pastoral ministry is a *temptation* likened to her stepsister, i.e. the acedia that leads to intolerance, as though everything were a burden. The presumption of those who delude themselves into thinking that they can rely on their own strength, on the abundance of their resources and structures, on the organizational strategies one knows how to put in place is a *temptation*. It is a *temptation* to sit in sadness, for as it extinguishes all hope and creativity, it also leaves one dissatisfied and therefore unable to enter the lives of our people and to understand them in the light of Easter morning.

Brothers, if we distance ourselves from Jesus Christ, if our encounter with Him loses its freshness, we will experience first hand only the sterility of our words and initiatives. For pastoral plans are useful, but our trust is placed elsewhere: in the Spirit of the Lord, who — in the measure of our docility — continually opens up the horizons of mission.

To avoid running aground on the rocks, our spiritual life cannot be reduced to a few religious moments. In the succession of days and seasons, in the unfolding of times and events, we learn to see ourselves by looking to the One who does not pass away: *spirituality* is a return to the essential, to that good that no one can take from us, the one truly necessary thing. Even in times of aridity, when pastoral situations become difficult and we have the impression that we have been left alone, it is a *mantle of consolation* greater than any bitterness; it is a *metre of freedom* from the judgment of the so-called “common sense”; it is a *fount of joy*, which enables us to receive everything from the hand of God and to contemplate his presence in everything and everyone.

Let us never tire, therefore, of seeking the Lord — *of letting ourselves be sought by him* — of tending over our relationship with Him in silence and prayerful listening. Let us keep our gaze fixed on Him, the centre of time and history; let us make room for His presence within us: He is the principle and foundation of mercy which envelops our weaknesses and transforms and renews everything; He is the most precious thing we are called to offer to our people, who otherwise are left at the mercy of an indifferent society, if not in despair. Every man lives by Him, even if he ignores Him. The lofty standard of holiness passes through Him, the Man of the Beatitudes — a Gospel passage that returns daily in my meditation: if we mean to follow Him, no other way is given to us. In travelling this way with Him we discover that we are a people and come to recognize with wonder and gratitude that all is grace — even the struggles and contradictions of human life — if these are lived with a heart open to the Lord, with the patience of an artisan and with the heart of a repentant sinner.

The memory of the faith is thus a companion, belonging to the Church: here is the second feature of our profile.

2. Pastors of a Church that is the Body of the Lord

Let us again try to ask ourselves: what image do I have of the Church, of my ecclesial community? Do I feel I am her son, as well as her Pastor? Do I know how to thank God, or do I hold on especially to delays, faults and failings? How ready am I to suffer for her?

Brothers, the Church — in the treasure of the living Tradition, which most recently shone in the holy witness of [John XXIII](#) and [John Paul II](#) — is another grace for which we ought to feel deeply indebted. For the rest, if we have entered into the Mystery of the Crucified One, if we have encountered the Risen One, it is through his body which, as such, cannot but be one. Unity is a gift and a responsibility: it's being a sacrament configures our mission. It requires a heart stripped of every worldly interest, far from vanity and discord; a welcoming heart, capable of empathizing

with others and also of considering them more worthy than ourselves. This is how the Apostle counsels us.

Within this perspective the words ring out as timely as ever with which, exactly 50 years ago, Venerable Paul VI — whom we shall have the joy of proclaiming Blessed next 19 October, at the conclusion of the Extraordinary Synod of Bishops on the Family — addressed the members of the Italian Episcopal Conference, and set forth the service of unity as “a vital issue for the Church”. “The moment has arrived (and should we be grieved by it?) to give ourselves and to impress on Italian ecclesial life a strong and renewed spirit of unity”. This Discourse will be given to you today. It’s a gem. It’s as though it had been delivered yesterday, really.

We are convinced of this: the lack or in any case the poverty of communion constitutes the greatest scandal, the heresy that disfigures the Lord’s Face and lacerates His Church. Nothing justifies division: better to yield, better to renounce — ready at times even to take upon oneself the trial of an injustice — rather than rend the tunic and scandalize God’s holy People.

Therefore, as Pastors, we must shun temptations that would otherwise disfigure us: a personalistic management of our time, as though we could leave the well being of our community out of this consideration; gossip, the half truths that become lies, the litany of complaints that betray deep disappointments; the hardness of the one who judges without becoming involved and the laxity of those who condescend without taking responsibility for others. Again, being consumed by jealousy, the blindness caused by envy, the ambition that creates opposing trends, factions, sectarianism: how empty heaven is of those who are obsessed with themselves.... And then the withdrawal that seeks the lost security in the forms of the past; and the claim of those who would like to defend unity by denying diversity, thus humiliating the gifts with which God continues to keep his Church young and beautiful...

In regard to these temptations, ecclesial experience constitutes the most effective antidote. It emanates from the Eucharist, whose power of cohesion generates fraternity, possibilities for mutual acceptance, forgiving one another and journeying together; the Eucharist, which is the source of the ability to make one’s own an attitude of sincere gratitude and to preserve peace even in the most difficult moments: that peace which allows one not to be overwhelmed by conflicts — which sometimes are the crucible that purifies — and not to delude oneself in the dream of always beginning anew elsewhere.

A Eucharistic spirituality calls us to participation and collegiality, in a pastoral discernment that is nourished in dialogue, in seeking and struggling to think together: it was not without reason that Paul VI, in the Discourse cited — after having defined the Council as “a grace”, “a unique and happy occasion”, “an incomparable moment”, “the climax of hierarchic and fraternal charity”, “the voice of spirituality, goodness and peace for the entire world” — held up, as it’s “dominant note”, the “free and ample opportunities for investigation, discussion and expression”. And this is

important in an assembly. Everyone says what he thinks, face to face, to his brothers; and this builds the Church, it helps. Without embarrassment, say it, as it is....

This is the way for the Episcopal Conference to be a vital space for communion and the service of unity, in evaluating dioceses, even the smallest ones. Starting with the Regional Conferences, therefore, do not tire of weaving relations of openness and mutual respect among yourselves: the power of a network resides in quality relationships that break down distances and bring territories together through comparison, the exchange of experiences, and the desire to cooperate.

Our priests, as you well know, are often tried by the demands of the ministry and are sometimes even discouraged by the seeming lack of results: let us form them not to stop and calculate input and output, to verify if all that they believe to have done corresponds to the harvest: our time, more than being a balance sheet, should be devoted to that patience which is the name of mature love, the truth of our humble, grateful and trusting gift of self to the Church. Make it your aim to assure them of your closeness and understanding, let them always feel at home in your heart; see to their human, cultural, affective and spiritual formation; next November's Extraordinary Assembly, which is to be dedicated precisely to priestly life, is an opportunity that should be prepared with particular care.

Promote religious life: yesterday it's identity was tied especially to works, today it constitutes a precious *reserve for the future*, provided that it sets itself as a visible sign, beckoning everyone to live according to the Gospel. Ask the consecrated, the men and women religious, to be joyous witnesses: one can't tell others about Jesus in a boring manner; especially because, when one loses his joy, one ultimately interprets reality, history and one's own life in a distorted light.

Love people and communities with generous and total dedication: they are your members! Listen to the flock. Trust in its sense of the faith and the Church, which is also manifest in so many forms of popular piety. Trust that God's holy People has its finger on the pulse of the Church to identify the right roads. Generously support the growth of lay co-responsibility; provide opportunities for thought, planning and action for women and young people: with their intuition and their help, you will succeed in delaying no longer over pastoral plans based on previous schema which, in fact, are generic, inconclusive, fragmented and of little influence. Instead, you will adopt a pastoral plan that hinges on the essential. As St Thérèse of the Child Jesus summed it up with profound simplicity: "To love him and to make him loved". May this also be the kernel of the *Guidelines for Proclamation and Catechesis*, which you will be addressing over the course of these days.

Brothers, in our often confused and disjointed context, the first mission of the Church continues to be a leaven of unity, which becomes active through becoming a good neighbour and through the various forms of reconciliation: only together will we succeed — and this is the concluding feature of the profile of the Shepherd, in being a prophecy of the Kingdom.

3. Pastors of a Church, anticipation and promise of the Kingdom

In this regard, let us ask ourselves: Do I look upon people and events with the gaze of God? “I was hungry..., I was thirsty..., I was a stranger..., naked..., sick..., in prison” (Mt 25:31-46). Do I fear God’s judgment? As a result, do I expend myself with generosity of heart to scatter the good seed in the field of the world?

Here, too, we face temptations which, combined with those we have already considered, impede the growth of the Kingdom, God’s plan for the human family. They are revealed in the distinction we sometimes make between “ours” and “the others”; in the closure of someone who is convinced that he has enough problems of his own, without having to concern himself with the injustice that causes those of others; in the sterile waiting of someone who does not leave his own enclosure and cross the square, but remains seated at the foot of the bell tower, letting the world go its own way.

Quite different is the breath that animates the Church. It is continuously converted by the Kingdom it proclaims and whose anticipation and promise it is: a *Kingdom* that is to come, without anyone being able to define it in an exhaustive way; a *Kingdom* that remains beyond, that far surpasses our plans and reasoning, or that — perhaps more simply — is so small, humble and hidden in the dough of humanity, because it deploys its power according to the criteria of God, revealed in the Cross of his Son.

Serving the Kingdom involves living as though we were off centre, yearning for the encounter which is the road for truly rediscovering what we are: proclaimers of the truth of Christ and of his mercy. Truth and mercy: let us never separate them. Never! “Charity in truth,” [Pope Benedict XVI](#) reminded us, “is the principal driving force behind the authentic development of every person and of all humanity” ([Caritas in Veritate](#), n. 1). Without truth, love turns into an empty box that everyone can fill at his own discretion: and “a Christianity of charity without truth would be more or less interchangeable with a pool of good sentiments, helpful for social cohesion, but of little relevance”, which as such excludes from the plans and processes of promoting human development ([ibid.](#), n. 4).

With this clarity, brothers, may your proclamation then be cadenced with the eloquence of gestures. Remember: the eloquence of gestures.

As Pastors, maintain a simple lifestyle, detached, poor and merciful, in order to walk swiftly and do not put anything between you and others.

Be interiorly free, in order to be able to be close to the people, attentive to learning their language, to draw near to each person with charity, supporting people in the nights of their solitude, restlessness and failures: supporting them, so as to warm their hearts and thus spur them to embark on a journey of meaning that restores dignity, hope and fruitfulness of life.

Among the “places” where your presence seems to me most necessary and meaningful — and which an excess of prudence would condemn as irrelevant — first there is the *family*. Today the domestic community is heavily penalized by a culture that privileges individual rights and transmits a logic of the temporary. Become a convincing voice for what is the first cell of every society. Bear witness to its centrality and beauty. Promote and defend the life of the newly conceived child as well as that of the elderly. Support parents in their difficult and exciting educational journey. And do not neglect to bend down with the compassion of the Samaritan to those hearts that are wounded and who see their plans for life compromised.

Another area that today must not be neglected is the waiting room crowded with people who are *unemployed: unemployed, workers who have been laid off work, temporary workers*, where the drama of those who cannot feed their families meets the drama of someone who does not know how to keep a company afloat. It is an emergency of historic import, which challenges the social responsibility of all: as the Church, let us help others not to give in to gloom and resignation by supporting with every form of creative solidarity the struggle and efforts of all those who, in their work, feel themselves deprived of dignity.

Lastly, the lifeboat that you have to lower is a welcoming embrace to *migrants*: they flee intolerance, persecution, lack of a future. May no one turn his gaze elsewhere. Charity, which we witness in the generosity of so many people, is our way of life and of interpreting life: through the power of this dynamism, the Gospel will continue to spread by means of attraction.

More generally, may the difficult situations experienced by so many of our contemporaries find you attentive and involved, ready to reexamine development models that exploit creation, that sacrifice individuals on the altar of profit and that create new forms of marginalization and exclusion. A society deprived of hope, shaken in so many of its fundamental certainties, impoverished by a crisis that, more than economic, is culture, moral and spiritual, is crying out for a new humanism.

Considering this scenario, may communal discernment be the soul of the path of preparation for the National Ecclesial Congress in Florence to be held next year: please help it not to remain on the level of ideas, however noble they may be, but put on spectacles capable of seeing and grasping reality and therefore, the paths to govern it, aiming to make the community of men more just and fraternal.

Go out to meet whoever asks the reason for the hope that is in you: welcome their culture, respectfully hand on the memory of the faith and the company of the Church; therefore, the signs of fraternity, of gratitude and of solidarity which anticipate, in man’s lifetime, the reflection of the Sunday whose sun shall never set.

Dear brothers, our meeting this evening and, more generally, your assembly, is a grace; it is an experience of sharing and synodality; it is a reason for renewed trust in the Holy Spirit, for us to

receive the breath of his voice in order to second it by the offering of our freedom.

I accompany you with my prayer and my closeness. And pray for me, especially on the eve of this pilgrimage to Amman, Bethlehem and Jerusalem 50 years after the historic meeting between Paul VI and Patriarch Athenagoras: I carry with me your shared and strong closeness to Mother Church and to the peoples who inhabit the blessed land in which Our Lord lived, died and was raised. Thank you.